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A STRUCTURED FAMILY INTERVIEW IN THE ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL LEARNING DISORDERS.

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PRESENTED HERE ARE THE GOALS OF, THE TECHNIQUES FOR, AND THE AUTHOR'S EXPERIENCE WITH A ONE-SESSION STRUCTURED FAMILY INTERVIEW FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH SCHOOL LEARNING DISORDERS. THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF THIS TIME-LIMITED METHOD IS TO DETERMINE THE NATURE, EXTENT, AND ETIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE FAMILY AND THE SCHOOL LEARNING DISORDER. TECHNIQUES SUCH AS A SERIES OF QUESTIONS, THE TUTORING LESSON, AND THE PARTIAL-FAMILY SESSION HAVE BEEN EMPLOYED TO UNCOVER FAMILY BEHAVIOR DIRECTLY RELATED TO SCHOOL LEARNING. AN ANALYSIS OF 53 CASES REVEALED THAT SIGNIFICANT DIAGNOSTIC INFORMATION REGARDING THE FAMILY COMPONENT OF SCHOOL LEARNING DISORDER WAS PRODUCED BY THE STRUCTURED INTERVIEW. AS EXAMPLES OF THE KINDS OF INTERACTION AND MATERIAL PRODUCED, FOUR CASE STUDIES ARE GIVEN. THE AUTHOR RECOMMENDS THE ASSESSMENT OF THE FAMILY BE INCORPORATED INTO THE DIAGNOSTIC STUDY OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH SCHOOL LEARNING DISORDERS. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 45TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN ORTHOPSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION (CHICAGO, MARCH 20-23, 1968). (WR)

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A STRUCTURED FAMILY INTERVIEW IN THE ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL LEARNING DISORDERS

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Introduction

It has been recognized for many years that parent-child and family relationship dynamics are very significant factors in the etiology and perpetuation of school learning disorders. [1,2,3] These dynamics are often critical in gaining an understanding of neurotic learning inhibitions, [4,5,6,7,8,9] and are also important in comprehending learning disability or under-achievement of non-psychogenic origin. [10] However, the assessment of children and adolescents with learning disorders has not given adequate attention to family aspects of these problems. The major emphasis in evaluation of learning problems has been placed on information from tests of achievement, intelligence, and personality, on medical data (neurology, ophthalmology, endocrinology), the psychiatric interview of the child, measurement of physiological correlates of learning (visual-motor, auditory, and visual perception), and appraisal of "psycho-linguistic" abilities. The taking of a family history has been with few exceptions the extent of past diagnostic efforts in terms of family involvement with learning difficulties. With the recent upsurge of interest in family therapy, interviews with families have become an integral

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part of the evaluation process in some orthopsychiatric settings. A review of the literature, however, reveals that family interviewing has not yet established itself in clinical practice as an essential part of the diagnosis of learning disorder.

The need for knowledge about family functioning is pointed up by the recognition that the family is the first social unit, that patterns of socialization and learning are first acquired in the family setting and that the parents of the child are indeed his first teachers. Attitudes toward and feelings about authority and learning process, as well as family values regarding the importance of school, are taken by the child into the classroom. A positive or negative identification with same-sex parent as a learning person is usually well-defined by the time the child enters school, and the quality of the working relationship between teacher and child can be strongly influenced by carry-over from the parent-child relationship. Thus, the impact of the family on school learning is considerable, and the need for pertinent diagnostic data is clear.

Information about the family inferred from test performance, questionnaire, or parent report is less reliable than first-hand observation of family interaction. The objective of this paper is to present the goals of, the techniques for, and the experience with a one-session structured family interview used by the author in the assessment of children and adolescents with school learning disorders.

Goals of the Interview

The primary purpose of the structured interview is to determine the nature, extent, and etiological significance of the interaction between the family and the school learning disorder. It is obviously impossible in one interview to gather all the vital information about the complex dynamics of a family, nor is it necessary to "cover all the bases" in order to get a useful diagnostic impression. It does seem feasible, however, to uncover those aspects of family relationships, communications and values that are negatively affecting a child or adolescent's school achievement, and to accomplish this objective in a single structured interview.

The involvement of individual neurosis-family pathology in school learning difficulties is well known and has often served as a point of departure for clinical consideration. The frame of reference of the interview described in this paper, however, is the here-and-now of intrafamilial functioning, and the diagnostic focus is, therefore, restructured to concentrate on the resultants of dynamics as expressed in the family communication and relationship systems that are revealed in interview behavior. For example, the psycho-sexual forces driving a mother to infantilize a son are not considered germane as interview content, rather the emphasis is on discovering if a pattern exists wherein the mother's behavior (and son's cued-in response) serves as a brake on the boy's learning to cope with frustration, task demands, and problem solving needs with consequent problems in classroom learning activities. Thus, when mother continually speaks for the child, shields him from responsibility for constructive participation in the session, or quickly gives answers to arithmetic problems the moment the child hesitates, the interview is considered to

have produced diagnostically significant information when mother's behavior is linked to teacher's characterization of the child as having little frustration tolerance, short attention span, a tendency to give up quickly when balked, and as putting forth minimum effort in learning academic skills. What is looked for, then, is an operational definition of the family difficulty in terms of its effect on the school learning disorder.

Aspects of the family that have yielded relevant and important data include:

1. Quality of communication, with particular emphasis on role-cueing, double-bind messages, and confusions around expectations for achievement.
2. The roles of father and mother as models for identification with the learning process - the parent as an achievement model.
3. Conflicts in parent-child and family relationships.
4. Family attitudes toward school achievement, including reflections of status needs, mobility strivings, and other culturally-determined values derived from class, caste, race, ethnic, and religious factors.

The above list is not intended to be complete in terms of possibilities for diagnostic search but rather a general framework for conceptualizing the kind of material to be collected. The relevance of interview content can be evaluated as the interview progresses by noting whether it can be fitted into this frame. It should be noted that the relative importance of the categories

listed above will vary from family to family - sometimes the intensive exploration of one aspect of the family make-up may be sufficient to establish the significant bond between the family and the learning difficulty.

A key goal of the interview is to establish <u>specific</u> connections between family functioning and the school problem. It is the author's experience that the attempt to make explicit the links between the family and school achievement helps to maintain a sharper interview focus and results in heightened involvement of family members in interaction with each other and with the interviewer. It appears, moreover, that a more meaningful and less-easily discounted transaction occurs when the problem is delineated in operational terms. For example, if the interviewer has established that the parents permit the child to ignore their verbal requests during the session and to tune out most of the discussion, he <u>could</u> point out to the parents the generality that they may be fostering negativism or immaturity, and that school learning would likely be adversely affected. It is more effective to elicit through teacher, parent, or child report, the fact that the child's listening habits in school are poor and that the child consistently does not follow directions in class, and to then make a specific tie-in between the classroom behavior, the parenting pattern, and the school learning disorder.

Techniques of the Interview

The basic approach to conducting the interview is the structure of focusing directly on the school learning problem. Content is limited, with rare exception, to school learning-family material. When the discussion veers away from the primary focus, the interviewer directively guides the family back on to the track. Attempted diversions are not interpreted as resistance, instead the interviewer continues to "zero in" on the verbal and non-verbal behavior that relates directly to the issues categorized above under goals. Repetition of or referring back to one of the questions listed below usually serves to pull the session back into the frame.

The use of a specific series of questions has been an efficient way of starting the interview - these questions are given below in the order they are usually presented:

1. (to the parent) "What do you expect of _____in school?"

   Note: The answer to this question is often ambiguous, and if so, the question is repeated until a clear, direct response is elicited. This perseverance tends to give a structured "set" to the remainder of the interview.

2. (to the child) "What did mother (or father) say, "or "What does mother expect of you in school?"
3. (to the parent) "Is_____meeting that expectation?"
4. (to the child) "What did mother say?", or "Does father think you are meeting that expectation?", or "Are you meeting that expectation?"
5. (to the parent) "Are you disappointed that _____is not meeting the expectation?"
6. (to the child) "Is father disappointed about your not meeting the expectation?"
7. (to the parent) "How have you tried to help_____with this problem?"

Techniques (cont'd)

Not all of these questions are asked in all interviews, and the questions (and their order of presentation) can be modified according to the issues being explored at the time. In addition, discussion can be directed to a communication issue itself. For example, if it seems clear that a family member is not listening, the interviewer can focus on the inattention. If it appears that the child or parents are skeptical about an answer the interviewer may ask, "Do you believe what _____said?" Or if a parent has indicated that some specific change in the child's school behavior is expected, the interviewer may ask the parents if they really think the change will occur. Occasionally, the interviewer will express doubt about a statement made by parents, especially around the issue of expectations, in order to provide encouragement for the child to verbalize his disbelief. The parent may say, "I want him to do his best - if his best is C's, that's all right." With the interviewer's support, the child may be able to overcome fear of contradicting his parents in public, and indicate that C's are not acceptable, that B's or A's are the obligatory standard. Frequently, parents expect and demand much more than they will express in the initial stages of the interview. On the other hand, one needs to remember that the child can distort and project his own high standards on to the parents.

Other productive issues related to school learning are homework and report cards. A frequent source of friction is the "homework hassle." Conflicts that generate around this issue furnish diagnostic clues, and the interviewer may ask questions about homework if the topic does not come up spontaneously. Another

subject that can arouse much feeling is the report card. It has been enlightening to discover the wide spectrum of parental reaction to report cards, ranging from almost total ignoring of the card to intense rage. Some parents make a deliberate practice of not discussing the card with a child except for a brief non-committal comment. Others use the card as a veritable bill of indictment in a one-sided "discussion." Children's fear of parental reaction can result in their losing or hiding the card, changing the grades, or in extreme cases - suicide.

In addition to the foregoing, topics useful for discussion can be tailored to the psycho-social makeup of the family. Family "educational history" compared to the value the family places on learning may provide useful data. By careful inquiry, one can avoid making stereotyped assumptions about cultural values - for example, the notion that parents of the working class child consider education to be less important than their middle-class counterparts. Sometimes parents may describe their own school experiences and this description can be illuminating for the whole family.

In regard to the form of the interview, the family may be seen conjointly, for the entire 60-90 minute session, or in various combinations for part of the time. In some situations, the interviewer may wish to talk to the child with each parent separately and/or with both parents together, with siblings, and finally in conjoint session. An advantage of seeing one parent at a time with the child is that the interaction may be more intensive. Moreover, the parent may feel freer to state a position and to react more spontaneously at first with the spouse not present. Inclusion of siblings in partial-family sessions can aid the uncovering of family system processes such as scapegoating or labeling. The

sub-sessions mentioned above follow the same approach described in this section of the paper - it should be noted that they do not substitute for seeing the family conjointly since the exploration of family-unit communication, relationship and system factors is important. In practice, the format of the interview has varied as the author has experimented with it, and flexibility is the rule-of-thumb. As an example, the author has felt it advisable in a few cases to see the parents separately near the end of the interview in order to make some connection that was not appropriate to share with the children.

A productive addition to the interview format described above is the sample tutoring lesson, involving parent and child.* The lesson can be in a partial-family session or in conjoint meeting. This technique evolved from the author's experience over the years in including the parents in psycho-educational therapy sessions.[11] The purpose of involving parents in the therapy session is to demonstrate appropriate ways of helping the child with homework, to model constructive approaches to the child's resistance to task orientation, or to provide opportunity for interaction and interpretation. However, the unanticipated but diagnostically significant insights that often emerged from these sessions had the cumulative effect of sensitizing the author to a fuller understanding of the role parents play in the child's learning disorder. Experience with the sample tutoring lesson in structured family interviewing had established the value of direct observation of parent-child interaction in an authority-related, task-oriented situation. An illustrative case using the parent-as-tutor tactic is described in another section of this paper.

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*A variation is to have the interviewer assume the tutor role to demonstrate the transaction between the child and a more neutral authority around a school learning activity.

In discussing techniques, the author would like to consider briefly the question of diagnosis-as-treatment. The notion that diagnosis can and does have treatment value is generally accepted in clinical practice. Some treatment gains both during and following the family interviews have been observed. It has been helpful for children and adolescents to learn that they are not solely responsible for the learning disorder, even as their share of the responsibility is pointed out. Bringing into the open the "family secret" or the many feelings surrounding school learning can be beneficial to the child and the family. An attempt is made in the interview to get the family to make the specific connections between their functioning and the learning disorder with as little help from the interviewer as possible, partly as a means of pointing up their own potential for problem-solving. Occasionally, families become very active during the session and assume responsibility for making needed changes. In general, it is desirable to look for strengths as well as weaknesses and to try to make the family aware of positive contributions they can make toward resolving the problem.

Finally it should be noted that the interview technique delineated in this paper tends to place more emphasis on authority, confrontation, and directive - ness than one finds in a less structured situation. For this reason, the interviewer needs to be aware of the greater potential for projecting his own needs onto the session or family, and for coming across as a blaming rather than as a helping person. In addition, the amount of guilt and upset then can follow a confrontation of parental and family-unit responsibility in contributing to the learning disorder points to a need for careful handling of feelings generated by the interview. In this regard, the designation of parents as potentially positive change-agents (in terms of specific ways the parents can improve the

child's school learning situation) can allay guilt and alleviate upset. One of the values of making a direct link between family and learning disorder is that specific ways of helping the child can then be described to the parents. For example, if parental "running interference" for the child leads to low frustration tolerance in learning, concrete examples of how parents could function differently in this area can be offered. If parents feel they cannot implement advice readily, the suggestion can be given that this inability could be worked with as a constructive step in aiding the child. As in any diagnostic procedure, one should be alert to the possible need for follow-up.

Experience with the Interview

The author would like to share his experience in using the structured interview under two headings (1) analysis of data gleaned from a review of fifty-three family interviews, and (2) summaries of four cases. The interviews discussed below were conducted in three settings: The Mental Health Development Center of Retail Clerks Local 770, AFL-CIO, The Southern California Permanente Medical Group, Department of Psychiatry, and private practice, over a period of two years. The families in this study range from upper middle class to lower working class. Minority group (Negro and Mexican-American) representation in this sample is approximately fifteen per cent of the total, and the ratio of boys to girls is four to one. All families were intact and lived in the metropolitan Los Angeles area.

A. Analysis of Data

The material given below was obtained from a review by the author of his case files. Diagnostic information was placed under nine categories dealing with family system, relationship, and communication factors. All data related to school learning fit appropriately into this arrangement. It should be noted that there was some overlap between categories, and that many interviews yielded more than one critical factor. The number in parentheses after each category heading indicates the number of times this factor was revealed in the fifty-three interviews.

Factors

1. Double-bind messages were given by parents regarding their achievement expectations of the child.(11)

Generally reflected in a "I-want-you-to-do-well-but-I-know-you-can't" kind of message, - this factor was sometimes tied in with cueing a

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* The analysis of interview content involved a subjective assessment by the author - the material is, therefore, not presented as objective research data amenable to statistical treatment.

"damaged child" role. Examples in the case material of reasons given by parents to explain why child could not meet their stated expectations included a visual problem, a mild heart condition, minimal brain dysfunction, "inability" of child to achieve in absence of parent, and poor listening habits.

2. Communication between parent and child regarding (1) achievement expectations, (2) actual performance by the child in school, or (3) disappointments regarding performance, was characterized by ambiguity and/or dishonesty. (19)

" As long as he does his best" (but the standard is really "A"), "we'll be satisfied with C's" (when the expectation-demand is B or A), and "we don't care about grades - we want him to love learning." (Yet censure or rejection have followed low grades on report cards.) were frequently-heard comments by parents that illustrate the potential for confusing or discouraging a child in this kind of parent-child communicaton.

3. Permission was given by parents to the child to fail, to continue immature behavior in school, to underachieve, to avoid stress, act out resistance to educational process, or passively resist school learning. (18)

One prominent type of family interaction was a pattern of infantilizing the child that resulted in school problems of low frustration tolerance, poor listening habits, consistent (and sometimes massive) avoidance of the stress of learning, and weak task orientation. Lowered behavioral expectations as a result of the parent's viewing the dild as damaged was noted in a number of cases, and some overlap of this factor with the double-bind message was apparent.

4. A significant discrepancy was evident between parental expectation of the child and the child's interpretation of that expectation. (2)

Distortion by the child (academic goals as set by parents incorrectly perceived as inordinately high) resulted in resentment toward parent and teacher

authority. The low incidence of this factor (two cases) suggests that the children and adolescents in this study were rather accurate in assessing level of parental expectation.

5. The same-sex parent represented a poor model in terms of learning-achievement. (16)

Fourteen fathers and two mothers represented models of weak, passive, ineffectual approaches to environmental mastery. In the interview, these parents would often replicate the school behavior of the child,e.g. not listening, memory lapse, plea of inability to understand, and other forms of passive resistance to task demands.

6. Strong disagreement between parents, particularly in regard to expectations or management of the child relative to school learning, were present. (6)

Ineffectual or non-existant structure around homework, divergent achievement expectations, and inconsistent rewards, or consequence antecedent to school success or failure were produced by unresolved differences between spouses. As a result, the child was preoccupied, confused, and somewhat frozen in terms of utilizing intellectual ability in the school setting.

7. Overall communication in the family, as experienced by the child, is confused and dishonest. (9)

The child verbalized lack of certainty regarding his actual level of performance, teacher expectations, or school standards. There was a tendency for the child to distrust or to be confused by information. The end product of this factor is weakened or indifferent motivation for achievement.

8. Parent-child relationship difficulty was focused in the school learning area. (14)

Strong, constant pressure from parents for high achievement accompanied by punitive or rejecting attitudes toward the child and a lack of communication

between parent (s) and child about school (except when a poor report card stimulated rage reactions, from mother or father), were examples of conflict centered around learning. Resistance to or hostility toward authority transferred from parent to teacher was frequently the outcome in this category.

9. Achievement expectations communicated by parent to child was markedly inappropriate in terms of the parent's characterization of the child's ability. (6)

Parental disappointment and children's fear of failure were linked as concomitants of this factor. Overlap with the double-bind message category is evident.

The tabular count of factor frequency in the fifty-three interviews was 101. In some cases, the information from the categories above seemed adequate to explain the child's difficulty in school learning. With many families, the material fitted in with the results of other assessment procedures to lend weight to the multi-causational point of view. In total, the diagnostic data uncovered in these family meetings represented a substantial contribution to an understanding of the school learning disorders.

B. Case Material

Four of the structured interviews in this study are described below as examples of the kinds of interaction and material produced by this technique.

The Harris family interview illustrated parental permission for the child to fail in school. Another factor present was the modeling of father to son of negative response to communication task demands and to the feelings aroused by frustration.

Sam Harris, age nine, was reported by school to be achieving far below ability, and to be unmotivated, with short attention span, low frustration tolerance, and overall resistance to learning task demands. There was a history of prolonged absences from school (including a two-day hospitalization) accompanied by severe somatic distress but without clinical evidence of illness.

At the start of the session, father was asked what he expected of Sam in school, and the answer was, "not any more than any other kid." In response to repetition of the same question, he replied, "as long as he keeps up with the other kids." When asked whether Sam was keeping up with the other kids, father said, "some, yes...some, no...not in everything...(question repeated)... "in general." Further query did not elicit from father a clear or specific comment regarding the severe disability in reading and arithmetic reported by school. Sam's comments about these issues were similarly evasive and ambiguous. Interestingly, both father and son manifested a number of memory lapses during the session. Mother was asked about expectations and her answer was "I want him to try hard and to do his best," and when the question was repeated with a request for specificity, Mrs. Harris stated heatedly, "I don't want him pushed." Father was then asked to have Sam read from a very easy book - what followed was much balking by Sam, pleading by father, discussion and vacilation between them. Finally father stated that he thinks Sam will "grow out of" the problem of not wanting to read, and then turned to the boy and asked him what he thought father

should do to get him to read the sentence! Confronting the parents with the infantilizing and anxiety-producing nature of the father-son tutoring session produced some intellectualized "understanding" by the parents, but Sam continued to control them through crying, somaticizing, or stubborn refusal to read. At this point, the interviewer decided to conduct a very brief tutoring lesson in arithmetic, with the intent of modeling firm structure and positive encouragement. Sam absorbed instruction readily, and performed satisfactorily with a minimum of the "forgetting" evident in the reading. Sam was asked to wait in the reception room, and some discussion ensued with parents. Father was able to express his anger at Sam's balkiness, and said that his way of handling anger with Sam generally was to suppress it and "give up or give in." The parents were able to see that Sam, too, held in much feeling and that his behavior reflected a good deal of anxiety. The connection was then made between father's model of repressing feelings leading to "give up and give in," and Sam's repressed anxiety around task demands and his consequent "giving up" in school tasks or "giving in" with an ineffectual performance. In addition, resistance to school learning was connected to the many expressions during the session of parental permission to maintain current pattern of poor school functioning. Finally, it was pointed out that Sam's response to the arithmetic tutoring sample gave evidence of potential for positive change.

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The diagnostic "mileage" that can be obtained from the single question about parental expectations was illustrated in the following condensed verbatim excerpts from the taped interview with the Stevens family. Donald Stevens, age 7½, was reported by school to be retarded in all academic areas and to be only tangentially involved in school learning.

Therapist: I'd like to know, Mr. Stevens, what you expect of Donald in school?

Father: (nervous laughter) I don't know - I expect him to - to get by.

T: I'm really interested in hearing what you mean' what do you mean, you expect him to get by? I'm not sure I understand -

F: It means I don't expect any - I don't really care if he does brilliantly - I don't really care if he does above average, in fact, I'm not really upset, you know, that much if he has a lot of trouble either. But I mean, I'm more concerned - I really don't think I can put pressure on him to get higher marks, but I am concerned about his reading because it's a key to other things in school. I'm concerned that in some way that we can bring him up to the reading level, let's say, of his age group. Not necessarily now, but, you know, before he's ten years old.

Mother: I must say I agree - there's never any pressure on Donald at all.

T: I can certainly accept that. What I'm not sure I understand though, is your saying you don't - I'm finding it hard to express what you said because it's a little bit confusing. Do you mean you just want him to be able to get through school?

F: Well, what I'd like to see is if he's ten years old and reading up to his grade level. In other words, to me it's a long range thing - I don't expect overnight for Donald to be doing the work that perhaps everyone else in his class might be doing.

T: Oh, I see. So you're not concerned if he doesn't do well; you're not concerned if he doesn't do average; but you are concerned if he hasn't learned to read by the age of ten. Am I saying this correctly?

F: What I'm concerned about is - I hope that there should be some gradual improvement, so that let's say by the time he's ten he's doing adequate work in school.

T: What do you mean by gradual improvement? I'm not sure what that means.

F: I'm not sure what it means as far as reading, or as far as elementary school.

T: What do you expect of Donald in school - today, this week, next month - what do you expect of him?

F: Well, I could say I expect him to do whatever he can do.

T: If you said it, would you mean it?

F: Well, if he's not up to doing what the school considers passing work - I'm not concerned about that.

T: You expect him to do what he can do? Well, what can he do?

F: Well, right now he's - I guess he's below reading level of his grade, but you know that doesn't bother me that much; but if he has this kind of reading problem when he's ten years old - you know that's another - what - two and a half years or so, then it becomes something of more concern to me.

T: Would I be about right if I said that you're not concerned now, but you would be concerned if he's ten years old and he hasn't caught up in reading? Is that a fact?

F: Well, no I'm sorry - I'm concerned - I'm still concerned about Donald now, because I don't want those problems to occur when he's ten or eleven years old and not up to his reading level - I don't want those problems to occur. I'm concerned now.

T: Is there any connection between your concern about what will happen by the age of ten in reading, and what he's doing in school now, and what you expect of him?

F: No, I really can't - I don't think I - right now, to me, I'm just letting him go to school without any pressure on him and so forth, so he can just go to school - whatever the teacher has to offer him that the atmosphere will be such that there will be some kind of improvement.

T: Well, again I want to be sure I understand you. Are you saying that there isn't anything he is supposed to be doing in school about learning so he can be reading by the age of ten? That's what I think you said.

F: Well, at school the teacher presents a certain amount of material, now what I understand ---

T: What do you expect him to do about this presentation of material?

F: Well, if his reading problem is emotional - what do you mean, what do I expect him to do - what <u>can</u> I expect him to do?

T: That's what I want to know. What do you expect him to do with the material that's presented in the classroom regarding reading?

F: I don't know. I mean - what can I expect him to do? Can I expect - what can I expect as long as he has an emotional problem that's blocking his reading?

Later in the session, mother reported teacher comments that Don responded in class to questions with evasive, vague, tentative answers, or with an answer to a different question. Don's verbalizations during the session closely resembled teacher's description. Father, who became aware of his own tentative

qualified, uncommitted communication pattern, stated that observing Don's participation in the meeting made him aware of the model he was setting. After further discussion, Mr. Stevens was able to link the communication pattern with Don's school learning problems, and also could recognize the inherent permission-to-fail nature of the point of view he expressed in the beginning phase of the interview.

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The meeting with the Lewis family provided some insight into the effect of a marked discrepancy between academic expectations and an adolescent's ability, as well as the negative influence of a long-standing family problem. Mike Lewis, age 14, was reported by school to have a long history of poor achievement. School testing indicated he was average intelligence and teacher comments suggested a serious problem of inability to concentrate and also a tendency to become confused in mathematics.

At the beginning of the interview, Mike seemed depressed, preoccupied, fearful, defeated, self-deprecatory. In talking about expectations of Mike, Mrs. Lewis was vague, preoccupied, and her comments had a quality of being off-center. Only after much repetitive questioning, could she verbalize her disappointment in Mike's school work as being far below top quality. Further, Mrs. Lewis said that she did not believe Mike's statement (which was obviously sincere) that he wished he could do better. Mrs. Lewis' inattentiveness and apparent lack of sensitivity to Mike's feelings were pointed out. Mr. Lewis' position was that he had let Mike down by not beating him more when he was younger, with the result that Mike did not grow up to be a good student. Father blamed mother for not putting more pressure on Mike for achievement, but stated that he himself was too busy to pay attention to how the boy fared in school. A long history of

severe and violence-filled marital discord was then narrated by the parents, with much crying by mother in describing her feeling of total responsibility for father's alcoholism. It was revealed that the frequent quarrels between the parents (often concluded by violent assaults by father on the rest of the family), had driven an older son out of the home - a boy whose school record paralleled Mike's and who was now doing well in his job and in night school. As the interview progressed and the "family secret" (father's alcoholism) was brought into the open, Mike began to relax, concentrate, and make insightful contributions to the discussion. Mike had never been able to understand why his brother had done well after leaving the home, and in addition, had thought that he (Mike) was the cause of the parental discord.

Toward the end of the session, I asked the family to see if they could make any connection between what had taken place in the meeting and Mike's school performance. Mother indicated that she realized now that Mike's preoccupation in school and his lack of accuracy in arithmetic resembled her own performance. Both parents were able to see that Mike's high degree of concern, guilt and anxiety over the marital stress were largely responsible for his poor school work and that their expectations of him were not consonant with his average ability. Mike accepted and seemed vastly relieved by these specific connections. He revealed that he had felt something must be wrong with him for father to have paid so little attention to him. Mike expressed much appreciation as the parents scaled down their expectations of him, and the interviewer pointed out that this change, as well as willingness of father and mother to share the "family secret" with Mike, could have a most positive effect on the boy's academic progress.

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The Palmer family session pointed up the effect of double-bind messages and other parent-child communication-relationship difficulties on school achievement. Diane Palmer, age 15, had received consistently low grades throughout her

school career, had been placed in remedial sections of her academic classes, and was currently failing math. Teacher comments indicated Diane was frequently preoccupied or confused in class. Diane's sister, Patti, age 13, was a high achiever in school.

A brief sample work lesson with Diane prior to the interview revealed a very low self-concept and an attitude of utter defeat toward problems requiring manipulation of arithmetic concepts. In contrast, Diane worked very hard in arithmetic computation, an area she felt comfortable in. During this capsule lesson, Diane expressed her frustration in trying to understand explanations in arithmetic and her feeling of resentment at being rebuffed by teacher when she would try to get additional instructional help.

At the beginning of the interview, father described the family's appraisal of school achievement as a "must" for their upward-mobility strivings. Mr. Palmer related that he spent many hours patiently tutoring Diane in arithmetic, but that it took fifty repetitions for Diane to understand. At first, Mr. Palmer said he expected Diane to pass arithmetic and stated that he told Diane she could succeed if she tried. Skeptical probing of this point, however, enabled father to admit that he did <u>not</u> believe Diane could learn arithmetic. Mrs. Palmer felt it was a waste for father to spend so much time with Diane, declaring she wasn't sure if Diane could learn satisfactorily. Much general confusion was expressed by the family regarding Diane's academic capabilities and what should be expected of her. It was difficult for parents to see the connection between this muddle around expectations and Diane's confusion and defeatist attitude in school. Mrs. Palmer then expressed some concern about her relationship with Diane, characterizing it as a "silent war" that he replaced previous open hostility. Patti, who remained essentially detached during the meeting, did contribute vertification of the "silent war" relationship.

Toward the end of the interview, the parents became more honest about their opinion of Diane's school ability - finally and reluctantly calling her a "slow learner". However, neither parent overtly responded to Diane's bursting into tears in her open recognition that parents have not been able to fully accept her because of the slowness in learning. At this point, I pointed out the connections between Diane's feeling of not belonging in this family, the lack of recognition of her feelings, the mother-daughter conflict, the double-bind on expectations, and the resultant effect of these factors on school in terms of preoccupation, confusion and defeatism. The parents were able to draw their own conclusion that their disagreement as to the usefulness of home tutoring contributed negatively to Diane's efficiency in school. Father, who had taken the position at the start of the session that the problem was Diane's and not the family's concluded at the end of the interview that he and his wife needed counseling as part of any program of help for Diane's school difficulties.

In the four interviews described above, a variety of techniques were employed and diverse information collected. However, common threads could be found in the material - for example, the importance of learning as a family value and the distortions in communicaton involved in the attempts to implement that value. In all the families, school learning served as a focal point for the expression of difficulties in parent-child and family relationships, and direct links were established between family function and the learning disorder.

Discussion

As an educational psychologist specializing in the diagnosis and clinical treatment of children and adolescents with school learning disorders, it has been part of the author's responsibility to conduct comprehensive psycho-educational evaluations. These assessments often involve extensive educational and psychological testing as well as interviewing, and can take as long as six hours. The need to gather information about the family, combined with the practical issue of time, served to motivate a search for an effective but time-limited method of assessing the family component of learning disorders. The structured interview technique was developed as an answer to these needs.

In its basic orientation the approach described in this paper is qualitatively different from the interview in which one looks primarily for the psychodynamics or pathology in the family and its individual members. The latter approach concentrates on such issues as displacement of marital discord, problems in expression of aggression, hostility, or curiosity, frustrated parental ambition projected on to the child, or difficulties in identification or dependency. In the structured interview, one looks for the operational resultants of these dynamics in terms of family process.

Techniques such as a series of questions, the tutoring lesson, and the partial-family session have been employed to uncover family behavior directly related to school learning. An analysis of fifty-three cases files revealed that much significant diagnostic information regarding the family component of school learning disorder was produced by the structured interview technique. Thus, the approach outlined in this paper is considered to be effective in terms of stated goals. In conclusion, the author would like to recommend that assessment of the family be incorporated into the diagnostic study of children and adolescents with school learning disorders.

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